

What's the Point of Media Studies?

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The irony of the assault on media studies is that despite claims to speak from the intellectual high ground, it is informed by a deep anti-intellectualism. For the anti-media studies tirade is based on the dull and unthinking premise that we should live in a media-saturated society without any curiosity about its significance, its origins, its meaning or its influence. It should not be difficult to fend off such ill-considered criticism, and yet our defence of media studies is not as well rehearsed as it might be. This is, in large part, because our reasons for doing media studies lead us to a quite different set of rationales.

For those (like myself) informed by a wider set of social and political questions, the rationale is fairly simple. Our ability to understand politics, culture, or society depends on studying media. This motivation for media studies has media as its subject but not at its center. We study media less more because we are interested in politics, power, and society, than any intrinsic interest in media forms. In this kind of media studies, a feminist media scholar studies media because he or she is a feminist, rather than simply as a feminist.

This idea has a resonance in public discourse because it links media studies to a broader social purpose that is hard to question or ridicule. Where it has less appeal is for those students—and teachers—who like media studies because they like media. And this is where it starts to get muddled. If we begin with an interest in/enjoyment of media, we will be preoccupied with question of cultural value rather than significance. So we use our scholarship to distinguish between “good” films and “bad” films, to celebrate the richness and resonance of good TV or the complexity of computer games.

The importance of this more text-focused kind of media studies relies on two very different notions of credibility. On one hand, it may simply be a shifting of the traditional ground, whereby we extend traditional literary criticism (celebrating textual skill and complexity) to include forms of popular culture. The work of cultural critics, in this instance, bolsters the cultural capital attached to certain cultural texts. Each new meaning uncovered, every structural strategy revealed adds to its scholarly value. Eventually, any objections to such an endeavor wilt under the sheer weight of scholarly attention. *Citizen Kane* thereby enters the canon of worthy cultural texts with confidence and to polite applause. Advocates of this kind of media studies are, however, playing a decidedly long game.

Conversely, it relies on a critique of the entire system of cultural distinction and, in particular, the kind of cultural capital accrued to elite cultural forms. If we can deconstruct Dickens, we can deconstruct *Desperate Housewives*. There is a politics here, but like other forms of populism, we cannot assume what form it takes. It may be guided by a democratic and egalitarian spirit or a libertarian affirmation of free-market economics. Or, like some celebrations of audience power, it may be claimed by either side.

As a defense of media studies, this last rationale may be the most popular with media studies students (after all, if you can use it to explore your own cultural preferences, what's not to like?). But it is also, in the wider world, the least persuasive. By this, I don't mean that it is an illegitimate position but rather that the cultural conditions on which its currency depends are less clearly in place.

As a rationale, it shares much with the study of art or literature, and yet it aims to skewer precisely those cultural values that make the study of art or literature unproblematic in the eyes of the world. It is partly because art or literature is inaccessible, difficult, critically acclaimed, or part of our heritage that it is deemed "worthy" of academic study. If the cultural texts we are exploring are none of these things, then we are caught in a politically awkward position. On one hand, we are motivated by a democratic dismantling of cultural distinction, whereas on the other, we are, by the inescapable logic of our academic position, elevating our explorations of these popular texts above the everyday and the popular.

To the media studies skeptic, this makes accusations of pretension or pointlessness seem self-evident—media studies is merely teaching us about a world we know already or else subjecting it to unnecessary levels of analysis. What could come to the rescue at this point is an appeal to vocational utility: the idea that media studies gives students an appreciation of the way media forms work and will thus make them better practitioners.

While there may be some truth to this, it suggests a media studies designed to equip students with a set of skills—whether creative or journalistic—for the workplace. Notwithstanding the tensions here between the demands of commerce and loftier principles of good practice, most versions of media studies include far more than a set of practice-based skills. At the same time, while there are some well-respected practice-based degrees, many sections of the industry regard media studies with suspicion. In short, a media studies based on a love of media will often find its attentions unrequited by the media it studies.

Thus rebuffed, this text-focused media studies can issue a broader appeal to an educated citizenry, whereby media studies makes us savvier, more discriminating users of media: a kind of literary criticism let loose on popular culture. And here it gels with versions of media literacy that have been appropriated by august institutional bodies (in the United Kingdom, by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and the regulator Ofcom) where—alarmingly to some of us—media literacy is

either allied to a remorseless consumerism (the media literate being equipped to sample the delights of a hi-tech media world) or an apologia for media policy with questionable social outcomes (thus equipping children to “resist” the onslaught of commercial messages that media policy has created).

The problem facing this version of media studies is that these paths to public legitimacy suggest a functionalism—the training of good workers or consumers—that will not only constrain any broader social or political critique but may run counter to it. So, for example, do we train journalists to understand the role of journalism in society and the responsibilities that may follow or to exploit the darker arts of its more exploitative excesses?

All of this matters because the political efficacy of media studies is based partly on its ability to be taken seriously, as well its ability to attract students. And whether our media studies begins with society or with media texts, it is the former who will struggle for popularity, while the latter face a more difficult set of challenges in answering questions about the point of media studies. In short, it may well be that those who start from society and politics and those who start from the text need each other, but we must also understand how best to play to our strengths and weaknesses.

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